

gather

FOR FAITH AND ACTION

\$5.00

April 2016

Walking fools

A gentle strength

Welcome the stranger


Beyond above and beyond



PROCESSED

MAR 14 2016

TU LIBRARY



*You could invest in an ordinary IRA.
Or you could invest in an IRA that lends a helping hand.*

FAITH LUTHERAN CHURCH
LAVALLETTE, NEW JERSEY

Save for retirement with the Mission Investment Fund and you might just save an ELCA congregation. That's because your investments earn a great rate of return and finance loans to ELCA congregations like Faith Lutheran. When Superstorm Sandy destroyed the renovations Faith had financed with an MIF loan, MIF deferred Faith's loan payments until the congregation got back on its feet. Why invest in just any IRA when you can invest in one with a heart?



Mission Investment Fund
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

To learn more about the competitive interest rates and flexible terms we offer on a wide range of investments for individuals and congregations as well as ministry loans, contact our financial services center at mif.elca.org or 877.886.3522.

IRAs • TERM INVESTMENTS • SAVINGS ACCOUNTS • MINISTRY LOANS

Mission Investment Fund investments are subject to certain risks. See "Risk Factors" in the MIF Offering Circular. MIF investments are not bank accounts. As securities issued by a nonprofit institution, the investments are not insured by FDIC, SIPC or any other federal or state regulatory agency. The securities are sold only by means of the Offering Circular. This is not an offer to sell or a solicitation of an offer to buy the securities described here.



Editor Elizabeth Hunter
Associate Editor Sarah Carson
Editor-at-large Sonia C. Solomonson
Editor, Café Elizabeth McBride

Art Direction On Track Marketing
Cover Oleh Slobodeniuk
gathermagazine.org

CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP 101

VOLUME 29 NUMBER 3 APRIL 2016

Paul challenges us to be of one mind—sharing in the work of the gospel, caring about interests other than our own and living out our "heavenly" citizenship on earth.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6 Beyond above and beyond | Consider your calling. <i>Karen Bockelman</i> |
| 12 A gentle strength | The power of gentleness is there in everyday encounters. <i>Audrey West</i> |
| 18 Welcome the stranger | Beyond comfort zones. <i>Carol Schersten LaHurd</i> |
| 22 'It was kind of you to share my distress' | Learning life lessons from a cross-country trip with my mother and sister. <i>Sarah Carson</i> |
| 36 Walking fools | Becoming April fools for Christ. <i>Christa von Zychlin</i> |

DEPARTMENTS

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 Voices | Embracing our differences <i>Sarah Carson</i> |
| 5 Give us this day | Mysterious ways <i>Kristin Dill</i> |
| 10 Let us pray | Stillness as prayer <i>Julie K. Aageson</i> |
| 16 Family matters | Easter Mondays <i>Anne Edison-Albright</i> |
| 26 Bible study
Christian citizenship 101 | Session four: Keep on keeping on
In this closing session, we encounter some of the best-known passages from Paul's letter to the Philippians. <i>Phyllis Kersten and E. Louise Williams</i> |
| 32 Leader's guide | |
| 34 Earthwise | Sustainability <i>Venice R. Williams</i> |
| 41 Grace notes | Telling our stories <i>Linda Post Bushkofsky</i> |
| 42 Amen! | 'Don't worry' is easier said than done <i>Catherine Malotky</i> |

PLUS ...

- | | |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 21 Trending now | How <i>Gather</i> connects with social media |
| 43 Directory of reader services | Subscription, editorial and advertising information |

gathermagazine.org

Gather (ISSN: 2163-0941). Copyright © 2016 by Women of the ELCA, is published monthly, except January/February and July/August (10 times a year), by Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189. **Business and Editorial Offices:** 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189. Call (845) 267-3074 to subscribe. Application to mail at Periodicals postage prices is pending at Chicago, IL and additional mailing offices. **Annual subscriptions:** \$15.00; outside the United States add \$11.50 for postage. Single copies, \$5.00. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to *Gather* PO Box 336, Congers, NY 10920-0336.



VOICES

Embracing our differences

by Sarah Carson

If you were to build a time machine and travel back to tell the college-aged Sarah Carson that one day she'd accept a job as an associate editor at a Christian women's magazine, I'm not sure her response would be positive.

If she believed you at all (and she probably wouldn't; the current Sarah Carson probably wouldn't believe you if you said you were a time traveler, either, but let's suspend belief for a minute), she'd probably think the older version of herself had lost her mind.

I grew up immersed in church—from Sunday school to youth group and all of the church landmarks in between. But as a young adult, my attitudes about church shifted. I didn't see the things I felt called to act upon—social justice, peacemaking, serving those in need—reflected in the congregations of my childhood. Frustrated and heartbroken, I walked away.

But as it often does, the Holy Spirit started moving. As I grew older, I learned that Christians are as diverse and complicated as any other group of human beings. We come in all sizes and shapes and bring with us any number of traditions and passions and identities. So while the church of my childhood may no longer have been a good fit for who I was becoming as an adult, I was able to find a new congregation that did share my values (shout out to Grace Lutheran Church in Evanston, Ill.!).

In returning to the church, I not only rediscovered the joys of being a part of the body of Christ, but learned the Holy Spirit speaks to us all in different ways.

So I think it's particularly fitting that I begin my work at *Gather* with this issue on Christian citizenship. This month's issue includes the voices and stories of women from a wide array of backgrounds and stages of life.

In "Welcome the stranger" (page 18), Carol LaHurd discusses the many opportunities through which she has learned from people different from herself—students to whom she taught English in Syria, a Muslim scholar and Buddhist monk in a seminary class—and encourages the church to look for ways to embrace multiculturalism as well.

In "Easter Mondays" (page 16), Anne Edison-Albright recounts lessons she's learned from more experienced clergy as she embarks on her journey as a young mother and pastor in her first call.

And in "Walking fools" (page 36), Christa von Zychlin encourages us to see the lighter side of life in God's kingdom—to learn to laugh and find the humor in the life of the church.

The authors in this issue are as diverse and different as the members of the church itself—creating opportunities for us to learn from one another, to examine our beliefs and to become better people.

They provide for us ways to live out Christ's second greatest commandment: to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. 🌿

Sarah Carson is associate editor of *Gather*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Mysterious Ways

Kristin Dill

The old saying, “God works in mysterious ways,” I can attest to be true. In 2010 my husband of then 21 years heard a call to serve the church as an ordained pastor. I was completely shocked. You see, when we met, he was atheist. Now, 26 years and two kids later, I am about to take on the role of “The Pastor’s Wife.” Even as someone who believes in God, who was raised in the church, I never saw this coming.

In December 2011, my husband quit a high-paying IT job. My dream house went up for a short sale. We relocated our lives to Dubuque, Iowa, dragging along our son, in his first year of community college, and our daughter, a sophomore in high school. We were all leaving behind everything we’d known. I had never lived outside Illinois or away from family and friends. I do understand Dubuque is not a foreign country, but it wasn’t home either.

I struggled. Here I’d helped to bring my husband to church, and my reward was losing everything I knew and loved. I was so angry and hurt that I didn’t actually move to campus until four months later—resisting, much like Job in Scripture.

A few years later I heard a sermon based on Genesis 32 about Jacob’s struggle with God’s will for him. How well I knew that story. Jacob walks away with a painful reminder—a limp, after injuring his hip. While I don’t walk with a limp, I have many reminders from this journey.

I have seen God first-hand through the growth of my children and the

strengthening of my marriage. I have watched a community of people comfort each other through horrific grief, standing together in the power of prayer. I have seen someone near death miraculously recover and thrive today.

During those seminary years, whenever I thought I lacked, God provided. When I was hungry, there were potluck meals, church meals and the food pantry. During a financial crunch, surprising gifts arrived in the form of gift cards and “thinking of you” checks from unexpected places. Bonding and support came from other spouses who felt the pain and joy of seminary life.

In May 2015, my husband graduated with a master of divinity from Wartburg Theological Seminary. As I write this, our family is preparing for our first call to serve in the church. We never walked alone. God was with us continually, even if I chose not to see it at first.

God is always at work in our lives, often behind the scenes. I believe we sometimes choose to make it more difficult by relying on ourselves to get through. Sometimes we forget God is with us every step of the way. God accompanies us whether we choose to see it or not. God really does work in mysterious ways. 🌿

Kristin Dill is married to Douglas Dill, a second-career pastor serving at Calvary Lutheran Church, Minong, Wis.

CONSIDER
YOUR CALLING



BEYOND ABOVE
AND BEYOND

When I completed seminary, I was called to serve as one of three pastors in a large Midwestern congregation. I paid careful attention to my letter of call. I was to preach and teach, administer the sacraments, marry and bury, minister to and visit members of the parish, equip members in witnessing to Christ and give pastoral leadership for meetings and activities, striving in word and deed to be a worthy example in Christian living. It was a pretty daunting list. I was also aware that there would plenty of demands “above and beyond” those listed.

Some months into that ministry, a group of 30-something members informed me that, although it wasn’t in writing, I was expected to join them on a summer canoe trip in Minnesota’s Boundary Waters. “This is non-negotiable,” I was told. I was more than willing, so there was nothing to negotiate.

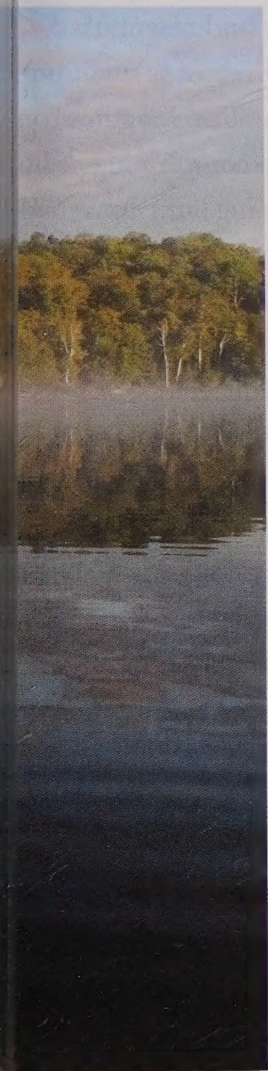
Four years later when I left that congregation for another call, my canoeing companions presented me with a miniature canoe paddle and a photo of myself in my canoe wear. Below the photo was a caption, “Above and Beyond the Call.”

I’m not sure any of us realized at the time the long-term impact of their expectation. So often the “above and beyond” demands on our time, energy, resources and spirit feel like a burden—one more load placed on an already aching back. Intended or not, this “non-negotiable requirement” was a gift, a lesson in self-care.

To what have you been called?

In Martin Luther’s day, the notion of having a calling was reserved for religious professionals—priests, monks, nuns. Laypeople had positions or stations in life, but those were decidedly second class. Luther spoke of the “priesthood of all believers” and insisted that Christians are called in baptism to love and serve both God and neighbor. He used the term “vocation” to speak of all our roles, responsibilities, occupations, relationships and activities in daily life. Vocation wasn’t restricted to a profession or job—or to something “religious.”

Baptism, said Luther, gives us a new identity: child of God. With that identity we are given talents, skills and inclinations as well as specific opportunities to serve God and our neighbors. In fact, we have multiple vocations—wife/husband, parent/child, student/teacher, citizen/elected official, congregation



member/pastor. We live out our vocations in our daily lives where all aspects of life—home and school, work and leisure, community and nation, citizenship and friendship—belong to God.

To what have you been called? Take a few minutes to respond to this question, keeping in mind that the “what” is plural.

Our baptismal letter of call asks us

- > “to live among God’s faithful people,
- > to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper,
- > to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
- > to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and
- > to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”

(Affirmation of Baptism, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 237)

This, too, is a pretty daunting list—so inclusive that it seems nothing in life could be “above and beyond” its expectations. We may no longer make the mistake of thinking that religious professionals have higher callings and therefore are closer to God. But how many of us still fall into the trap of thinking God likes us best when we do “churchy” things—teach Sunday school, sing in the choir, serve on the altar guild or congregation council, volunteer our time at church events? Aren’t we called as Christians to put God first? And isn’t that almost the same thing as putting the church first?

Resentful ‘yes,’ gracious ‘no’

Many of us find an important identity in the work (paid or volunteer) we do in our congregations, even if it sometimes takes us

away from roles and responsibilities in other areas of our life. We are quick to say “yes” to every request. Or we are equally quick to ask the same faithful ones to take on an ever-increasing number of tasks. “If you want to get something done, ask a busy person.” But when the tipping point comes, and we’ve taken on one too many responsibilities, we can end up feeling bitter and resentful.

A pastor friend told me of a situation in her small congregation. The longtime one-woman altar guild began complaining of how much work she was doing and how badly she needed help. The pastor spent significant time talking with others about who might be willing to help with altar guild duties. One of the newer members volunteered. For several weeks she met with the woman who had been bearing this responsibility. She wanted to be trained, to understand the work and to honor the experience of this faithful worker. Finally, the Saturday came when the new person was to have full responsibility for setting up communion for the next day. But when she arrived at the church at the appointed time, she found that the work already had been done by the longtime volunteer.

How easy it is to think of ourselves as indispensable. Without me it won’t get done. Or it won’t get done right. Often we don’t realize the message this attitude can send to others. It’s not unlike (in our family callings) dressing our children rather than teaching them to do it themselves or doing the cooking rather than teaching how to cook. I must confess that in my working life, I all too often found it easier to take on yet another task, rather than take the time to build a community to share that task. And then I found myself resenting, or at

ast regretting, what I had agreed to do.

One of the great (and sometimes unappreciated) gifts of baptism is that we are not alone. We are baptized into the church, the body of Christ, whose many members have their own contributions to make in loving and serving God and neighbor. In our varied callings, we serve and are served by others. Part of what it means to be a member of the body is to offer a sense of being valued to others. If we cherish our callings, don't we want others to learn, explore and share their callings as well? A resentful "yes" wears out everyone. A gracious "no" can be a gift to everyone.

Exodus 18:13-18 tells us a lot about Moses' leadership style. Moses seems to be working 24/7 and can't see the consequences. His father-in-law is blunt. "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone." Sometimes we need someone else to point out the obvious.

We need margins

Have you ever seen one of those very old letters, written in a day when both paper and postage were costly, even a luxury? The writing covers the page from one edge to the other. In some cases the paper is turned 90 degrees, and the writing continues perpendicular to the first paragraphs. I've even heard of letters where a third layer is written diagonally across the first two. Cover the back of the page in the same way, and you've managed to convey a great deal of news on one sheet of paper, while at the same time making it nearly impossible to read.

One of the greatest "inventions" in print-

ing and letter writing is the margin—the white space around the edges makes reading a pleasure and understanding possible. Our lives need margins as well. No matter how hard we try, we cannot do it all.

If we are called "to serve all people, following the example of Jesus," we would do well to recognize that Jesus allowed for margins in his life. There are many passages in Scripture where we read that Jesus went off to pray, often in a deserted place (See Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 11:1). In Mark's Gospel we are told Jesus went out in the early morning, while it was still dark, and there he prayed (Mark 1:35). Every Holy Week we hear of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. But I still remember the time I learned John's account of Palm Sunday where, after his entry into Jerusalem and some teaching in the temple, Jesus departed and hid from the crowds (John 12:36b). Who knew?

It's been more than 35 years since I was "ordered" on that canoe trip. I wish I could say I learned the lesson so well that I've been a champion at balancing all aspects of my many and varied callings. The best I can say is that I keep trying. Whenever I remember my baptism, I pray to be sustained with the gift of the Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in God's presence, both now and forever ("Holy Baptism," *ELW*, p. 231). That keeps me going "above and beyond the call." 🌸

The Rev. Karen G. Bockelman is a retired ELCA pastor, living in Duluth, Minn. She continues to feel called as a wife, mother, preacher, writer, church volunteer, workshop presenter—all while trying to "practice what she preaches" about good self-care.



LET US PRAY

Stillness as prayer

by Julie K. Ageson

In a small, quiet room

lit by soft lamp light and a candle—a spare place conveying a sense of the sacred—a group of friends gathers again for conversation and catching up. At the beginning and ending of their time together, there is silence and prayer. And while the conversations and catching up are at the center of their intertwined lives, the silence at the beginning and the prayer at the ending are bookends that shape and define the group.

These friends were part of my life for almost two decades. We shared life-changing illnesses, joy and sorrow, two premature and unforeseen deaths. Our time together was itself life-changing, and now, several years later, I still feel the stillness of that quiet room, the silence of God's presence, the palpable peace.

Their voices, their laughter and the way each of them brought such richness to our monthly gatherings are inscribed in my heart. The stillness we experienced together, so uncharacteristic of the ways we usually interact, is part of the cherished time we shared and a gift I continue to ponder.

Stillness as prayer is powerful. It needs to be guarded and treasured because silence too often eludes most of us, and we too often avoid it. Sometimes silence makes us uncomfortable, and we hurry to fill its gaping, undefinable and uneasy presence. Stillness can be frightening. It leaves us seemingly alone and vulnerable, open perhaps to dreaded memories, unattended issues or hard questions of life and faith.

Words and chatter or busy-ness mask our uneasiness. We often find ourselves amid the clamor and din of the world, not wanting to let down our guard—sometimes wearily and sometimes by choice. “Be still,” my grandmother used to say. “Quiet time,” I say to my own grandchildren. Stop the running and the spinning of your life. Rest. Heal. Be.

Many of us long for that space for stillness—silence—in worship. That silence may be the only place in the course of the week where God's presence is tangibly touched and tasted. Stillness in worship is a physical experience, an act of grace and mercy.

Making space for stillness—silence—in the course of everyday life can also be a place of comfort and peace, space for God. It opens a place for God to speak and be. What has been done has been done. What has not been done has not been done. Let it be.

Our culture values productivity, and we measure worth by profit and cost. Stillness is holy space that cannot be measured in the world's terms. Its gift is the quiet of a still, small voice. Its gift is that no words are needed. We cannot simply be.

Perhaps stillness is the *best* definition of prayer. Standing still, being still and tearing away all the masks we wear and all the words we share, we open ourselves to God's mysterious care. Let us be still in the presence of God. 🌿

Julie K. Ageson retired from ELCA Resource Center leadership, and now she and her spouse write and travel.



CHANGE IS GOOD.

gather

switching to a new subscription service. What does that mean for you, a faithful subscriber to Women of the ELCA's award-winning magazine? Better, faster, more responsive service.

OUR NEW CONTACT INFORMATION:

844-409-0576 (toll free) or
845-267-3074, M-F, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. ET

Gather Subscription Order Center
PO Box 336
Congers, NY 10920-0336

gather@cambeywest.com
gathermagazine.org

Women of the **ELCA** 

© 2010 ELCA Women's Gathering. Women of Faith Magazine and Gather magazine are registered trademarks of the ELCA. All rights reserved. Photo by Jim Anderson



One of my favorite family photos sits at the edge of my desk. The black-and-white image shows a little girl, about 5 years old, with a grin wider than a Montana sky. She sits on a couch, pillows piled against one side to keep her from toppling over from the joy that threatens to wiggle her out of her seat. Her arms embrace a flannel-swaddled bundle, out of which peeks the wrinkled face of a newborn infant, eyes squeezed shut, just home from the hospital. Mom is seated beside them, one arm stretched behind the little girl's shoulders, one arm placed protectively in front of the baby, preventing her from rolling out of the little girl's arms—an unlikely outcome, given the child's iron grip on her new baby sister.



A gentle strength

by Audrey West

The photo has no inscription, but I know exactly what that mama is saying. I heard it many times as a child: “Be gentle, sweetheart. She’s smaller than you are.”

Those girls are middle-aged now, and their mother has surpassed the four-score mark, but young mamas and papas today can be heard issuing the same reminder as little hands reach for an antique dish on Grandmother’s table or stretch out to hug a puppy around the neck.

“Be gentle; it’s fragile.”

“Be gentle; she’s just a baby.”

“Be gentle; you’re stronger than he is.”

Gentle reminders

Paul writes to the Philippians, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone” (Philippians 4:5). Paul’s encouraging advice is one among a string of reminders about how the followers of Christ ought to approach life in a challenging world: “Rejoice...Be gentle...Don’t worry...Let your requests be made known to God.” The list reminds me of things that parents might say to their child while dropping her off on the first day of school. “Have fun...Be nice...You’ll be fine...Ask the teacher if you need something.”

Just as we send children out the door with final instructions, in the hope they’ll remember our words when things get tough, Paul writes these reminders near the end of his correspondence, making them easier for his first readers and hearers to remember long after the letter has been shared and put away.

We still need Paul’s reminders today—even if they don’t seem like a very strong hedge against the prevailing violence and fear that fuel so many human interactions. We need these reminders because the world teaches something other than “be gentle.” In worldly terms, ruthless power wins—particularly the kind of power that despises difference, demands compliance and devastates opponents. But that is not God’s way.

Pushover or powerful?

If we’re honest, however, the scriptural command to “let your gentleness be known to everyone” sounds just a little,

well, wimpy and weak—especially when sandwiched between reminders to rejoice and not worry. Indeed, when I asked a church youth group what they thought of Paul’s instructions to let other people see their gentleness, one girl drew herself up to her full and mighty height of five-foot-two. “There’s no way I’m gonna let people think I’m a pushover!” she replied.

I suspect that many among us would cheer her youthful confidence and strength. At least I know I would. After all, we follow the Christ who was anything but a pushover. He shared God’s good news with the lost and forgotten, spoke confidently with his opponents, challenged the status quo, hung out with sinners and other marginalized folk and strode courageously to Jerusalem even when he knew the threat that awaited him there. In faith we are bold to confess that he is God’s own son, through whom we have experienced the grace and love that God offers for the world. Such good news is hardly “pushover” material.

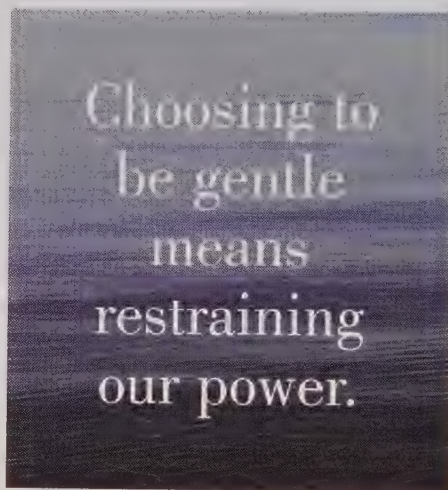
In fact, gentleness does not mean to “be nice no matter what,” nor does it mean to be a wimp or a doormat. Rather, in biblical terms, gentleness has to do with knowing one’s strength and choosing to restrain it. An invitation from Jesus suggests the truth of this claim: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29).

The gentle person is one who chooses not to exert the full force of her power. Gentleness is a function of strength, not a function of weakness. Considered in these terms, we recognize that God’s own gentleness is seen in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Strength as gentleness toward others

The New Testament includes two Greek root words that English translators typically render as “gentleness.” In Philippians, the Greek word is *epiekes* (pronounced ep-ee-i-kace’), which can mean several things: fairness, moderation, patient steadfastness, etc. At its basic level, the word has to do with not insisting on every right or custom that one could claim; that is, being willing to yield to another person, even if you have the right to do otherwise. It means to do what is equitable, not simply what is possible or allowable.

The second word often translated as “gentleness” is *prautes* (pronounced prah-oo’-tace). One example of this word is found in Galatians 5:22–23: “[T]he fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” The basic definition of *prautes* is similar to the definition of *epiekes*. It has to do with not being overly impressed with oneself and, instead, showing courtesy to another person; that is,



to be considerate of the other.

Gentleness happens when we act in ways that do not use our strength or power to do harm. Choosing to be gentle means restraining our power.

A few examples from nature might be helpful. One of the reasons we comment on the tranquility of a gentle rain is because we know that rain can beat down in torrents—swelling rivers, flooding fields and devastating communities. A gentle breeze refreshes on a warm day. We appreciate the peacefulness of its touch because we have seen (and sometimes felt) the power unleashed by a tornado or hurricane. My mom told me to “be gentle” with my new baby sister because I was, in fact, strong enough to hurt her if I squeezed too hard.

Gentleness is the choice *not* to exert the fullness of

our power when doing so would cause harm. This does not mean that we must stay silent in the face of inequality or violence, or that we must refrain from protesting or taking action on behalf of ourselves or others when we have the power to do so. Advocacy, even persistent advocacy, stands as the flip side of gentle living. We can seek the good, however, without destroying the other. Rather than being a sign of weakness, gentleness is grounded in strength.

Let your gentleness be known

What does it look like to live gently in today's harsh world?

Our answers to that question will differ, depending on the circumstances in which we find ourselves and the strengths we possess. We can begin, though, by acknowledging our capacity to hurt other people, even when that is not our intention. Confessing this truth opens our hearts for Christ to work the power of forgiveness within us and directs our strengths in appropriate ways.

Whether those strengths arise out of personal attributes (e.g., our personality, physical or intellectual ability) or roles we inhabit (e.g., parent, boss, co-worker, spouse) or socio-cultural status (e.g., racial or ethnic privilege, economic class), or even skills we have worked hard to develop, we can ask God in prayer to help us use them in a spirit of gentleness toward others.

A next step, after confession and prayer, is to seek opportunities to be gentler in our everyday encounters. The parable of the Good Samaritan offers a biblical example, suggesting that God desires that we reach out to our fellow humans (as the Samaritan did when he cared for his wounded enemy), rather than claim that it's our right to ignore them (as the priest and Levite did). Living in a spirit of gentleness means recognizing those times when we have a choice and then choosing helpfully and wisely.

Perhaps gentleness means assisting your congrega-

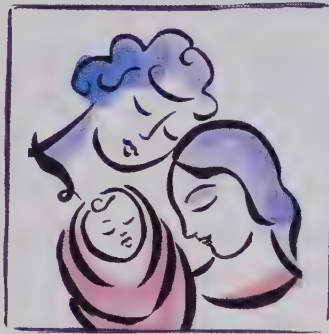
tion in welcoming a refugee family or helping at a food pantry, even if you feel awkward about it. Maybe it means thanking a co-worker who assists you, even if it is her job and she ranks below you in the company's organizational chart. Perhaps gentleness means finding ways to care for the earth, such as walking instead of driving when errands are less than a mile away, even if you can readily afford the gasoline. Perhaps gentleness means offering a hug to a frightened child or a listening ear to a lonely neighbor, even when you have important places to go and people to meet. Or maybe it means giving yourself a break when you need to recharge from too much caregiving.

I am reminded of an encounter a few years ago, when I was encouraged to be gentle despite my first inclinations. We live in an urban neighborhood comprised of old houses and apartments in various stages of renovation and disrepair. I looked out the window one day to see several children from the transitional housing around the corner tossing pinecones over a fence along the alley that runs behind our yard. Our dogs were outside, and I was afraid they would be hurt by the flying debris. I was furious at the boys for their careless disregard of our pets. I stormed out the door, primed to give them a piece of my mind. "I'll teach them," I thought angrily, preparing to chase them away. Before I could yell, though, one of the boys called out, "We like your dogs. How can we get them to play with us?"

His question called me up short and defused my anger. We talked. They taught me about the power of gentleness. I taught them how to greet the dogs, and we played a game of fetch. After that, we greeted one another regularly—not as sources of mutual aggravation, but as friends.

Be it babies, antique dishes, puppies or people—a little gentleness goes a long way. 🌿

Audrey West is a New Testament professor who seeks opportunities to live gently with her spouse and several four-legged critters in Bethlehem, Pa.



FAMILY MATTERS

Easter Mondays

by Anne Edison-Albright

A retired pastor whose son, granddaughters and great-grandchildren are part of my congregation hugged me and blessed me after worship on Sunday. He asked, as he always does, "So...how are the kids...?" The unspoken questions we both know are there in the ellipses go something like this: "Have they seen you, lately? Are they acting out? Does the congregation still love them? Does the congregation think you spend too much time with your family? Do your kids blame the church for you being away days and nights and weekends? Do they blame God?"

There may be other questions I haven't even thought of yet, hidden in those ellipses, in that pastor's eyes, in the way he hugs and blesses me. Another pastor of the same generation also visits our congregation. He brought me communion after my son Walter was born more than four years ago. Sometimes when he visits, he asks how we're doing, sighs deeply, and says, "It'll be OK," before I've had a chance to answer at all. Then he hugs me again. Many untold stories and years of experience live in that hug.

The truth is that, at this point in our lives, it is OK, and even wonderful, for me to be a pastor and a mom. Holy Week and the two weeks leading up to it are rough, though, involving long days, late nights, busy weekends and sleepless kiddos. Last year at 11 p.m. on Easter Sunday, my husband, Sean, turned to me and said, "I'm broken. I'm starting to get sick. I'm going to call in and sleep

all day tomorrow." I told him he should always plan to take Easter Monday off. "Like in Slovakia," I said. And then I remembered ...

My first Easter Monday after a busy Holy Week was in 2009, during my internship in Bratislava, Slovakia. Sean and I were both teaching at the bilingual high school, and I was also interning at the English-speaking international congregation. I think we taught classes until Wednesday, and then my supervisor and I worked on putting together everything needed for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. Sean cooked and I cooked for a community-wide Easter potluck. We were starting to get sick. We were ready for a break. So early Monday morning we hopped on a train to Vienna and spent the day wandering around the gardens at the Schönbrunn, which was free, and so beautiful. We took a nap on a bench by a fountain, sitting in dappled shade. It was maybe a touch too warm, but perfect after days of relentless sleety winter. I sat on that bench, my head on Sean's shoulder, feeling about as completely happy as a person can feel.

Easter Monday last year was different, of course. Walter shared with us late Sunday night that his ear hurt. He'd said it a few times over the weekend, so we decided to try and get him in to see the pediatrician. With both Sean and me there, the routine ear-check took on the feel of a fun family outing, which was odd, but also genuinely nice. It turned out that, yes, there was fluid in his ears and gunk in his throat, but no ear infection.

on. We took our boy back to daycare and commenced sleeping. It was a good, happy day.

I took a picture of the three of us in the van in the parking lot that day. I was also thinking about the picture of me and Sean in the Schönbrunn, and how it would be funny to compare them. It was pretty funny, but comparing, I do not think:

life and ministry with kids is any more or less an adventure than life and ministry without kids.

Life and ministry before kids was all palaces and sun-dappled afternoons in Vienna, and that after kids it's all trips to the pediatrician's office.

I'm happier now, or that I was happier then.

My life before my kids wasn't full or meaningful because it was. And my ministry, though it was just at its start, was, too.

Sean and I wanted kids, and we are overjoyed to have Walter and Sally in our lives. Part of loving them well is realizing that we are still real, full people apart from them. Before they were born, we existed, and we continue to exist as fully differentiated human adults—the way we hope they will be someday.

Based on the sighs and hugs and blessings of my elders, I can guess that challenging times lie ahead. But I don't know what the next years of life and ministry will bring. For now, we are OK. Easter is more than a day. It is a whole season that comes to us no matter what season of life we're in, filling us with the joy, hope, wonder and surprise of the resurrection.

My son, Walter, knows this.

"What day is it, Mama?" he asked

as we walked into the pediatrician's office last year.

"Monday."

"Easter Monday?"

"Yes! Easter Monday."

And the next day:

"What day is it, Mama?"

"Tuesday."

"Easter Tuesday."

"Well, yes ... yes, I suppose it is Easter Tuesday."

I'm looking forward to finding out what surprises, adventures, rest, joy, challenges and hope this year's Easter season will bring. 🌸

The Rev. Anne Edison-Albright is pastor at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Stevens Point, Wis.

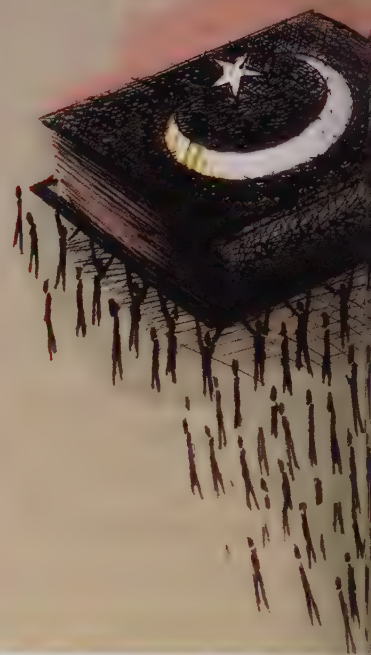
Anne, Walter and Sean Edison-Albright in their van after visiting a pediatrician.

(inset) Sean and Anne Edison-Albright at the Schönbrunn in Vienna, Austria.



Beyond comfort zones
**WELCOME
THE STRANGER**

by Carol Scherstan Leford



The Rev. Bonnie Sparks was close to retirement when she took a short-term call to help a congregation celebrate its 175-year anniversary—and then close its doors.

But, as she told me, “God didn’t get the message this church was supposed to close.”

Through a series of encounters and relationships—and a willingness to love the neighbor—Salem Lutheran Church thrives today as the new African National Ministry in Indianapolis.

How did this happen? One Sunday morning, Sparks noticed a newcomer among the small group of regular worshipers and invited him to introduce himself. This Pentecostal Christian from the Congo explained that he had found the congregation on the Internet. He liked what he experienced and soon began to bring more African Christians.

Inspired to serve new immigrants and led by Sparks, Salem Lutheran Church then created a clothing bank and an English as a Second Language program. Soon there were English classes led by a Muslim from Senegal and attended by people from India, Japan, Iraq, and many African countries.

We can thank the Holy Spirit for the fruits of these encounters. But we can also thank



the congregation's readiness to move out of its comfort zone to welcome new members from another continent and to see immigrants from diverse religious backgrounds as neighbors we are called by God to know and to love.

Years ago our family of four left small-town Pennsylvania for a year in Damascus, Syria. My husband lectured to English classes of 600, our young children made friends from 45 countries and I taught English to adults (surprised to find that our family was a lot like theirs). We all experienced the stresses and rewards of life among our mostly Arab Muslim neighbors.

Reflecting on this inter-religious immersion experience, I remember my growing-up years in Oak Ridge, Tenn. The World War II "Manhattan Project" had created a community of people from all over the United States and beyond. Many of the scientists and their

families were involved in local congregations. Some of my childhood buddies attended the one Reform Jewish synagogue in town. As I watched them prepare for their *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvahs*, I discovered the Hebrew roots of my own Christian Bible.

Our tradition is enriched

In the many decades since, I have come to embrace fully the relational aspects of life and faith. As a college and seminary professor and ELCA congregational educator, I have also come to appreciate how much we Christians can learn about and better live out our own tradition by encountering religious others.

I'm not the only one. During my years as the only Lutheran in the religion department at a Roman Catholic university, I was gratified when my Catholic students said that they more fully understood the

Christian concept of the Triune God after experiencing my Islam and Christianity course.

More recently it was seminarians in the Religions in Dialogue course I team-taught with a Muslim scholar and Buddhist monk. It was also members of Chicago-area congregations with whom I've shared how life-long inter-religious engagement has shaped my life and faith. I tell them how much I've learned from my hundreds of Jewish and Muslim friends about how following God's will can guide one's daily life—and from Buddhist friends and colleagues about the value of striving for mindfulness in all of life. At the same time, I have more steadfastly embraced the Lutheran Christian conviction that I need the free gift of God's reconciling action in Jesus Christ to bring me into right relationship with God. Then I can seek to live in response to God's will.

Called to welcome others

Learning to know and listen to religious others has strengthened my Christian faith and practice and increased my respect for the faithfulness of others. It's my hope that you as *Gather* readers can have similar experiences—not only for your personal spiritual growth, but so we can all move beyond our comfort zones and follow the biblical call to “welcome the stranger.” We can join with religious others as good citizens and as people of faith serving God's will for harmony in all of creation.

I am one of many Lutheran pastors and professors who are committed to inter-religious understanding and engagement for people in ELCA congregations, colleges and seminaries. Some of us serve on two consultative panels to advise the ELCA Office of the Presiding Bishop on Lutheran-Jewish Relations and Lutheran-Muslim Relations. Together, we have collected stories from around the ELCA to develop a congregational guide to inter-religious engagement. To be published in spring 2016, *Engaging Others, Know-*

ing Ourselves: A Lutheran Calling in a Multi-Religious World (Lutheran University Press) describes how many ELCA congregations and institutions share worship, education and service to the world with their neighbors of other religions.

We also know from history that religious traditions can be distorted and misused. The Spanish Inquisition, the Ku Klux Klan and faith-based support for American slavery and South African apartheid are a few examples of how Christianity has sometimes strayed from its highest ideals.

Now groups such as ISIS are distorting Islam for their political and military goals. It's particularly important to understand what is authentic and what is not in the religions of the world. When anti-Muslim protests were planned around the United States in October 2015, ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton was among the leaders of diverse religious groups making public statements through the Shoulder to Shoulder campaign. With the terrorist attacks in Beirut and Paris a month later, her words became even more relevant:

“As Christians, we are freed in Christ to love and serve our neighbors. Today our neighbors include Muslims—upstanding, faithful Americans. The enemy we face is not Islam, but hatred and fear. I join my sisters and brothers in calling for gestures of solidarity with our American Muslim neighbors. Together we can witness to the world that God's love will have the last word.”

My life experience and the gospel of Christ call me to join Bishop Eaton in engaging others in dialogue and friendship so we can replace hatred and fear with solidarity and community. 🌸

Carol Schersten LaHurd is a lecturer in world religions at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. She coordinated the ELCA Middle East peacemaking campaign from 2006–2010. She and her husband, Ryan, have two children and four grandchildren.

facebook

We asked our Facebook followers what their favorite hymns were as a child.

Here are a few of the responses. You can add your own response at on.fb.me/1RDrU1n.

Joyce Schoulte "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." I knew the words to at least the first verse and would have church with my dolls on the stair steps, using the hymnal we had at home.

Peggy Hayes "I Love to Tell the Story." My dad sang us to sleep with it.

Korla Masters "Canticle of the Turning!" It's still a favorite. 😊



10 SECOND SERMON

Being the mom of a tween can feel like walking a tightwire. Find a balance. Don't helicopter. Don't be too hands-off. Trust our child more, as he becomes more independent. Was it like this for you, Mary, mother of Jesus? At the temple, when Jesus was 12? At the wedding at Cana, with Jesus, the young adult? In this passage, I see you being "Mom," while trusting Jesus to be someone you raised, someone created by God, someone who will do what is right. I can learn something from you.

For more 10-second sermons, follow the Women of the ELCA on Facebook.



DAILY GRACE

Did you know you can receive daily devotionals straight to your smartphone via the Women of the ELCA's Daily Grace app?



Café

Recently Café – the Women of the ELCA's monthly online magazine for young adult women – asked women of all ages to share lessons they've learned about aging. Some highlights:

Amanda J. Garcia, 30: I wish someone had given me permission when I was 25 to stop rushing through my to-do list, to pay attention to the person I was becoming and to stop struggling to control my future.

Joy McDonald-Coltvet, 42: I've sometimes joked that life in the church is like a fountain of youth. No matter how old I get, many of the people I serve will still see me as quite young.

Sonia C. Solomonson, 74: As I review my life, I don't regret all the difficult, challenging, painful and sad things because these experiences have shaped who I am today. I've gained wisdom from each experience.


To read more, visit boldcafe.org

FROM OUR BLOG

It's the first of the month, and I am once again anxious. I must find volunteers to sort clothing for the children's clothing bank and to work the day we give them away. I fret there will not be enough clothing donations or that my faithful volunteers will grow tired. I scan the congregation for some new faces. Are people growing weary of my requests for help? Read more at womenoftheelca.org/blog/

Excerpted from "Keep on keeping on" by Karen Hawk





'IT WAS KIND OF YOU TO SHARE MY DISTRESS'

by Sarah Carver

When I was 15, my mother took my sister and me on a cross-country trip to meet one of her childhood friends in Utah.

It was the longest trip the three of us had ever taken together. After my parents divorced when I was in middle school, Mom was always stretched thin from working multiple jobs and taking night classes to finish her education. The vacation was a rare treat.

My sister and I each brought a favorite CD, switching back and forth every hour or so between her pop/dance mix and my favorite alt rock/punk band, and I put my recently acquired learner's permit to good use across vast stretches of Iowa, Nebraska and Wyoming. (How Mom survived this trip, I'll never know.)

When we arrived in Utah, we were greeted by red rock mountains and skies a shade of blue we'd never seen. We rolled into the driveway of a double-wide trailer, ready to meet the friend who had meant so much to Mom when she was our age.

But when Mom knocked on the door, the man who answered was somber. He explained Mom's friend had gone to Salt Lake City days before and had yet to return. He hadn't called in days.

We spent a week touring Utah with one eye on the cellphone. Mom kept her spirits up as we visited the county fair, went fishing at the lake and shopped at the local mall. But after seven days the phone had yet to ring, so we packed up and headed home.

Lesson to last a lifetime

I don't remember asking Mom any questions about her friend's disappearance. Maybe it was her composure during the trip, or maybe it was just teenage self-centeredness, but the fact that her friend never showed

hadn't seemed like a big deal.

When we returned home, though, the phone started to ring at odd hours. Mom would take the cordless phone to her room for long conversations. One day I was the first one home after school, and I answered one of the mysterious calls. I was greeted by a recording: "You have a collect call from the Utah State Prison."

That night Mom explained why her friend had never showed up to meet us in Utah. He'd struggled with addiction all of his life. Faced with the stress of seeing his old friend for the first time in more than 20 years (not to mention meeting her crazy, teenage children), he began using again and had been arrested as we were on our way.

People make mistakes, our mother explained. It doesn't make them monsters, and it doesn't make them less than us, she said.

She took his calls every night because they were friends—and he had never been more in need of a friend than he was right then.

Mom's lesson was one I've never forgotten—one that in Matthew 25, Jesus himself called us to live out.

'I was in prison and you came to me'

"There's a lot of misconception and misunderstanding," said Rob Nedbalek, pastor of Freedom in Christ, an ELCA worshipping community inside the walls of Montana State Prison.

Nedbalek has spent four years ministering to men inside the prison in Deer Lodge, Mont. Three to four days each week he conducts Bible studies, visits with

inmates and leads worship services. He spends the rest of his week on the road visiting congregations throughout the state and encouraging the church to live out Jesus' call to remember our incarcerated sisters and brothers.

"Most people think these are bad people who have done bad things," he said of the men to whom he ministers. "The reality is in most cases these are people who made a dumb choice. And at the moment it may have seemed like the only choice they had."

When Nedbalek visits a congregation, he said, he always begins by asking if anyone present has a family member or loved one in prison—or if they themselves have ever spent time incarcerated.

"First, everyone will look around to see if it's safe to raise their hand. And some may not raise their hands at all," he said. "We've shamed them. People are embarrassed to admit that they have a loved one in prison or that they've been in prison. As a society we turn our backs on the prisoners because they're out of mind and out of sight. We also tend to turn our backs on the families thinking somehow they deserve what they're getting."

According to a 2012 study by The Sentencing Project, a not-for-profit criminal justice research and advocacy organization, 1 in every 108 people in the United States is imprisoned. One in 25 American children has a parent who is incarcerated. And in Montana, Nedbalek said, 70 percent of those who leave prison end up back behind bars.

For those who are involved in religious programming, though, the recidivism rate is far lower. Only 25 percent of men and women who are able to connect with a worshiping community while they are incarcerated will return to prison after they are released.

"When they're involved with a worshiping community—a congregation inside the prison networked with congregations outside the prison—inmates can continue their relationship with the community," Nedbalek said. "So we're working to build networks—both prayer networks and support networks—within which communities can welcome inmates and work with their families to reintegrate them into their community."

Whether it's through prayer, volunteering inside the prison, writing letters or financially supporting a worshiping community such as Freedom in Christ, the church's support makes a tangible difference in the lives of those in prison.

"It was kind of you to share my distress," an imprisoned Paul wrote to supporters in the church at Philippi (Philippians 4:14). That sounds a lot like what Nedbalek today calls "a ministry of accompaniment," explaining: "We walk with one another through this."

A friend in an unlikely place

Not long after my mom sat me down to talk about her friend's struggle with addiction, I made a friend of my own who readily admits to having made some bad choices.

As a teenager, Curt had been in and out of juvenile detention. When he was 19, he landed himself in a situation that changed his life forever. Now 38, he has spent half of his life not only behind bars, but in "super-max confinement"—in a cell by himself, eating his meals and enjoying just one hour of "rec time" outside of his cell all alone.

By the time I graduated college, I found myself wondering about Curt, wanting to know how he was doing and what his life was like.

I thought about writing to him, but I was scared.



had heard stories about women who wrote to men behind bars. I'd even had a friend who'd fallen in love with a man in prison. People thought she was crazy or desperate or both. Would people think I was crazy, too?

But I thought of Jesus' words in Matthew 25:36: "I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me." I also thought there must be a reason Curt had been on my heart all those years.

My first letter to him was brief. I let him know I had been thinking about him, that I hoped he was going well and that he could write back if he wanted. Just a few days later I received an effusive reply—full of hand-drawn cartoon characters and smiley faces with googly eyes. He said it was so nice to hear that someone was thinking of him.

Nearly 10 years later we are still exchanging letters. Often he's a far better friend to me than I am to him. When my life gets busy and I forget to write, I'll receive a hand-drawn card from him that says, "Just wanted you to know I'm thinking of you" or "I'm rooting for you out there."

As much as I like to think I've tried to be there for him, as he shares with me about his life and his family, he's been there for me just as much.

Supporting those behind bars

Recently when I fell into another of my too-busy-to-write stages, I was surprised to find a letter from Curt in the mail.

He'd written to say he'd been promoted into a special program designed to prepare men for life after prison. He was moved from where he'd been in confinement for years and sent to a new facility. He now spends his time learning life and coping skills, as well as engaging in Bible studies and fellowship with other inmates. He's even thinking of enrolling in a program that would train him to minister to his peers.

I sent Curt a letter asking if he had any advice as

to how others could support him and his sisters and brothers behind bars. When he replied, he was quick to point out that everyone's experience of prison is different, but for people in the kind of supermax confinement he was, the support of those on the outside means a great deal.

"The number one thing a Christian in here needs is encouragement," he said. "The walls, the rules, the chains, the isolation, the sensory deprivation and everything else are designed to break a human being down. It's very hard to explain how someone can live a decade or more in a room the size of a closet without losing his mind."

Next, we can support those in prison through prayer, he said. "In Jeremiah 29:7, God instructed the captives to pray for the peace of the city in which they were held captive, because if that city prospered, so would the captives," he wrote. "I pray to plant seeds for everyone in my life, where I live, and the people in authority over me."

"Lastly," he said, "is fellowship—like what we do," referring to our letters. "Every time I hear from you it just opens a window into the world and pours a pitcher of sunshine in here on me. It makes me feel good knowing someone was thinking about me. It lifts me up."

To learn more

If you'd like to learn more or find out how you can get involved in a ministry of accompaniment with our sisters and brothers in prison, visit ELCA.org to download *Called to Hear: A Study Guide*, a five-session group study curriculum based on the criminal justice social statement adopted at the 2013 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

If you're interested in volunteering with a worshiping community such as Freedom in Christ, you can find more information about similar organizations in your area at prisoncongregations.org. 🌿

Sarah Carson is associate editor of *Gather*.

Keep on keeping on

Theme verses

Philippians 4:4–23

Opening hymn

Sometimes sung in Sunday schools, this song has words taken directly from Philippians 4:4. You may choose to sing it together or as a round:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Again I say, rejoice.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Again I say, rejoice.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.

Or you may wish to sing an Easter hymn such as “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice and Sing!” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 385)

Prayer

Eternal and all-merciful God, with all the angels and all the saints we laud your majesty and might. By the resurrection of your Son, show yourself to us and inspire us to follow Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

(Collect of the Third Sunday of Easter, Year C, *ELW*, p. 33)

Introduction

In this closing session of the Bible study, we encounter some of the best-known passages from Philippians. We will also reflect on all four sessions, to respond to God and to witness to one another.

Witnessing in a worried world

READ ALOUD PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7.

1. Does part of this passage especially speak to you today?

If so, take a few moments to talk about it.

Paul returns to the theme of joy in this general encouragement to rejoice followed by some additional words about the kind of life Christian citizens are to live. First, something should be evident about Christians in all their public dealings, that is, in their social and business contacts. The NRSV Bible uses the word “gentleness.” The Greek word might also be translated as fairness, moderation, patient steadfastness, forbearance. The implication is of behavior that goes beyond ordinary expectations—above and beyond the limits of legal justice. In other words, their behavior should stand out in the crowd. Like the One they follow, they will not seek honor and status but rather pour themselves out in compassion and concern for others.

2. What might that behavior look like in today's world?

Do you know someone who exemplifies Christ's own gentleness in dealing with others?

Paul's statement in the second half of verse 5 might have been a reference to Christ's anticipated return, but more likely Paul was pointing to God's nearness in spirit. In Christ, they have access to God, who is ready to answer their prayers and give them whatever they need to live as “citizens of heaven” in the world.

3. "Don't worry about anything," Paul admonishes in verse 6.
What might the Philippians be tempted to worry about?

Phyllis, recently asked a friend who is a psychiatrist at a large, prestigious university what the most prevalent issue is today for college students. Anxiety is the most common problem for the students who come to see her, she said. Their worries are beyond getting good grades, graduating or finding a life partner. They worry about what the future will hold or even if there will be a future for them.

Anxiety is high, and not just for young adults. It is an issue for many people of every age group—from young children to senior citizens. Following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, authorities have put many security measures in place. Since the high-profile shootings in schools and other public places, authorities have outlined emergency plans to address threats should they occur. Some experts have pointed out that, instead of causing people to feel safer, all the security measures and plans may actually cause people to be more fearful and anxious.

Some have even described the church as anxious these days as mainline churches have dwindling attendance and resources. Will our congregation survive? Does our church body have a future? Will future generations have faith?

When we are anxious, when we worry, we tend to see threats everywhere. We see scarcity rather than abundance. Our vision narrows, and we see only what worries us, rather than the whole picture. Anxious people look for someone to blame. Other people (and sometimes even our own selves) are seen as enemies—not people to treat with gentleness, patient forbearance, moderation, etc.

"Do not worry about anything," is easier said than done. Paul's antidote, though, is not just an admonition not to worry. Rather he encourages the Philippians and us to lean into the relationship we have with God—a

relationship that began in God's heart, and a relationship that Christians now participate in through baptism. Paul invites us to tend to that relationship through prayer and supplication, or petition, with thanksgiving.

You've likely heard it said that prayer is tuning into a conversation that is already going on with God. Throughout this study we have been reminded that God desires communication and communion with humanity. Part of that conversation is supplication or petition—asking God for help in specific needs.

All of this—prayer, supplication and making requests known to God—is done with an overarching attitude of thanksgiving. The Greek word there is *eucharistia* from which we derive "Eucharist." Like some other words we encounter in Philippians (recall, for example, *episkopoi*, *diakonoi* in 1:1 and *leitourgos* in 2:25), *eucharistia* had not yet evolved into liturgical and ecclesial language. The term was not yet associated with the Lord's Supper, the common meal of the early Christians. It does, however, have the sense of offering up to God the blessings in our lives, the tribulations we face and all those things over which we have no control.

Deaconess Linda Funke and her husband, Eric, serve in Tanzania. She is a social worker, and he is a teacher. Almost every day Linda writes a message on Facebook that begins, "Today we are thankful for..." She then goes on to list several things ranging from the simple to the profound: cold water on a hot day; baked goods; honesty which can sometimes bring conflict, but is the beginning of reconciliation; hearing the hopes, dreams and challenges of students; communion at church for the first time in several months; the two-year-old who decided to dance to the choir music today.

For years Oprah Winfrey has encouraged people to keep a gratitude journal and begin and/or end each day by listing those things for which they are grateful that day. During November (the month of Thanksgiving in the United States), people have challenged one another to list on Facebook each day one thing that

they are thankful for. Paul is not talking about just a general “gratitude attitude,” but an overarching spirit of thankfulness to God.

These ways of leaning into our relationship with God, Paul says, begin to transform us. We come to know the “peace of God which surpasses all understanding.” When we know that God’s peace protects us, we become a less anxious presence in this world.

In the minds of the Philippians, the peace of God might have been contrasted with *Pax Romana* (Latin for “Roman Peace”), which was about two or three centuries of relative peace in the Roman Empire beginning just before the time of Jesus’ birth and extending into the second century. (Historians generally agree that the date of the *Pax Romana* varied regionally, with the peace beginning earlier in some areas and ending later in others.) It was a peace won by Augustus (Octavian) by developing a coalition of strong military leaders to stop civil wars and by beating down opponents so that they no longer had the ability to fight back. That’s the kind of peace that human logic understands. In such a peace, the guarding and protecting would be done by strong Roman military garrisons.

God’s peace, as we recalled in Session Two, comes not by becoming powerful and “lording it over” opponents. God’s peace comes through servant-like self-emptying, in obedience to love, even to death on the cross. That way to peace exceeds the grasp of human understanding. It provides a protection that Paul knew very well, a protection that will be there in all circumstances—free or imprisoned, living or dying, in plenty or in want.

Keep on practicing what you know

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:8–9.

Here we come to Paul’s last “finally” in Philippians, and we meet another of the most beloved passages. Read verses 8 and 9 aloud.

4. How would you summarize Paul’s main point here?

Here Paul lists a number of virtues that would also be hailed in the Greco-Roman world of his day. He seems to assume a kind of consensus. People know that these things are good in and of themselves and beneficial to others. Taking these virtues into account, dwelling on these things, thinking about them will make a difference in how they see and treat one another.

Paul seems confident that the Philippians know what they need to know for their life together as communities of faith and for their citizenship in the public arena. They may have learned these things through formal instruction or through the oral tradition (word of mouth). Or they may have learned it through listening to and watching Paul himself. He simply encourages them to continue on their path and know that God’s peace will be with them every step of the way.

5. What things might Paul expect the Philippians to have learned both from his teaching and from his example?

A note of thanks

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:10–20.

This section seems to be a major change of topic from what has gone before. Some scholars think that this is the body of a separate letter sent to the Philippians after Epaphroditus arrived with their gift for Paul. Ironically, Paul does not thank the Philippians directly for their support. Some think that is because Paul did not want to seem to be asking for help or needing too much. Others think that in the Greco-Roman understanding of friendship, thanks was not necessary because friends were expected to help one another. Some scholars believe that Paul and the Philippians have a sort of contractual business agreement with the expectation that one partner would pay the expenses of the other for their common enterprise. Still others believe that Paul wanted to be clear that God was the proper object

thanks for whatever gift came. In this section, Paul uses language from the world of business and finance.

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:10-14.

We will see in the next paragraph that the Philippians had helped Paul in the past, but evidently here he is noting that it has been some time since they were able to send support to him. Now he rejoices that their concern has been revived. The word translated “revived” comes from agriculture and has the image of blooming again, as in spring after a long winter. The implication is that their gift is a natural result of their concern and love for him, rather than something forced from a sense of obligation.

6. From your own experience, how would you describe the differences between giving out of a “blossoming” of concern and love and giving out of obligation or duty?

The usual purposes for gifts Paul received would have been to finance additional travel for spreading the gospel. When he was in prison, however, the gifts might have been used to bribe the guards in order to gain more privileges such as receiving visitors or talking (preaching) to other prisoners and guards.

The Greek word translated “to be content,” literally means “to be self-sufficient.” In the economic or political sphere, it implied independence and having rights. The Greek stoic philosophers used this word to mean indifference to pain or pleasure, a self-sufficiency attained through disciplines of self-denial and tuning out the world around them. In contrast, Paul’s contentment came not from himself but from the One who gave him strength in any circumstance.

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:15-18.

7. How do the Philippians compare with others in supporting Paul?

Philippi was a market town, and the people would have been familiar with the language of commerce which Paul uses in this section. The phrase translated “giving and receiving” would have referred to debits and credits on a balance sheet. “Profit” was originally an agricultural word for “fruit” or “harvest” and later came to be accumulated profit on an account. “Paid in full” would have been a statement on a receipt with no balance due.

Epaphroditus brought both money and news of the Philippian Christians. Both were gifts to Paul and much more than a business deal. They brought pleasure to Paul and to God as a fragrant sacrifice.

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:19-20.

Paul closes this section with another assurance of God’s blessing. It is, after all, God—not Paul—who is their real benefactor. Paul has learned well that God supplies all his needs. He reminds the Philippians that this same God will bless them from God’s own wealth. And this God is worthy of glory “forever and ever.” The Greek is literally “unto the ages of the ages.” Many Orthodox Christians still use these words to close their prayers and benedictions.

“Amen” is a word of assent. “May it be so!” This Aramaic word was used to close prayers in the early church. That Paul uses the word here lends support to the idea that this may have been the ending of one letter from Paul to the Philippians that was later combined with other shorter letters in order to have the letter to the Philippians included in the New Testament. Whether or not this is a separate letter, Paul here emphasizes his confidence in God’s providence.

Closing greetings and benediction

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:21-23.

This is a typical conclusion to a letter from the apostle Paul. He makes it clear that this is not a private letter but one to be shared with all the saints, the whole church in Philippi. He includes greetings from people around

him, especially those the letter's recipients might know. If asked, Epaphroditus would have been able to supply the names. The reference to the "emperor's household" likely included imperial civil servants, both slaves and free, who were converted to Christianity because of Paul's witness while in prison. (Remember that in Session One Paul talked about how his suffering actually advanced the gospel.)

Bill Gafkjen, bishop of the ELCA's Indiana-Kentucky Synod, has a practice similar to Paul's. Whenever he preaches, he brings greetings from the people at the last place he has preached. And each time, he asks the congregation if he can take their greetings to the next place he is to preach. In doing this, he helps give the sense that the church is much bigger than the one congregation where he is preaching.

Verse 23 is Paul's closing benediction. It may be read as a blessing, a sort of prayer or wish: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Or it may be read as a statement of fact: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is with your spirit. This kind of benediction was likely already well known in the Greek churches, but the exact form varied from place to place and time to time. If you follow Lutheran liturgies, it may sound familiar, as something similar is used as the greeting.

We are accustomed to hearing benedictions at the end of our worship services. I, Louise, once heard of a father who spoke a benediction/blessing to his children each day when they went off to school. "Good-bye" is really a contraction of a blessing: God be with you.

8. In what situations and upon whom might (or do) you speak a benediction? What difference would (or does) it make?

Think on these things

As you have time, think about and discuss these questions either as they come up in the course of the study or nearer the end. Be sure to save time, though, to talk about ministry opportunities and do the closing activity.

9. If you think of prayer as tuning into a conversation that is already going on with God, what are some ways you have tuned in? What helps you lean into that relationship with God, who desires communication and communion with you?
10. What difference does (or might) it make if you begin and/or end each day giving thanks to God? What might it look like for you to offer your prayers and supplications, making your requests to God in an overarching spirit of thanksgiving? What effect might this have on some of your worries and anxieties?

Closing activity

Think back over the four sessions of this Bible study.

What are some of the themes that were woven through Paul's letter?

What images do you carry with you as you finish the Bible study?

Use the supplies provided by your leader to prepare a creative response to the study of Philippians. You may draw something concrete or use colors and abstract shapes to express a feeling or mood. You may choose to write something—a poem or reflection or hymn. You may do something else that uses your special talents. (When we presented part of this study to a group of leaders, one woman designed a Philippians' salad luncheon with creative titles for the salads.)

This is not a contest, but rather a fun way to express something you take with you from this study. Even if this sort of activity isn't your "cup of tea," we invite you to give it a try. Relax and have fun with it. It is probably best if you undertake this activity in silence for at least 15 or 20 minutes.

After you have had a chance to make your creations, come back together as a group.

Pray together

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the variety of gifts and talents among us. We thank you for the things that we have recalled and learned in this study. We thank you for the

opportunities we have had to encourage one another. Now we offer to you and each other what we have created.

Each person is encouraged to present their "creation," say something about it and share what they will take away from this study of Philippians.

You might continue by singing again, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice."

In closing, divide into two groups and pronounce Paul's closing benediction to each other. If you can, bless each other.

Group 1: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Group 2: Amen. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Group 1: Amen. 🌿

E. Louise Williams is executive director emerita of the Lutheran Deaconess Association, Valparaiso, Ind., and a past president of DIAKONIA World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Communities. She teaches theology part time at Valparaiso University, serves as spiritual director for several people and is a freelance writer, homilist and retreat leader.

Phyllis Kersten was associate pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Ill., from 1996–2008. Following her retirement from Grace, Phyllis served interim calls at Luther Memorial Lutheran Church in Chicago and at the Chapel of the Resurrection at Valparaiso University in Indiana. Previously, she and Louise Williams co-authored *Companions on Your Journey* (Women of the ELCA, Augsburg). Since April 2015, Phyllis has been back at Grace, River Forest, serving as the interim associate pastor.

LOOKING TO OTHERS' INTERESTS: CHRIST-SHAPED SERVICE

Many of you, no doubt, support a variety of ministries through your prayers and financial gifts. Most of us receive countless appeals for support through the mail, over the phone or through people in our congregation or community. Take some time to share with one another a favorite cause that you support and talk about why it is important to you.

For most of her life, my (Louise's) mother belonged to Peace Lutheran Ladies Aid, a group of farm women who met once a month to quilt. They were much in demand as expert quilters, and they charged "customers" by the spool of thread, so that

they received more money for the quilts that had more intricate stitching. They also took an offering each time they met. Many years ago, they used their accumulated funds to pay shipping costs for sending farm eggs, garden produce and home-canned goods to a Lutheran orphanage. When the orphanage no longer existed, they looked for other ways to support ministries with their money.

They soon learned that from within their group, they had personal connections with many charities. One member's daughter worked as a Bible translator in South America. Another member had a grandchild who was

adopted through Lutheran Social Services. I worked for the Lutheran Deaconess Association. The group made a list of organizations where they had some personal connections, and each time their treasury reached \$100, they sent off a check to one of those organizations in turn.

Perhaps someone in your group volunteers at a homeless shelter, is employed in a service agency or has personally benefitted from a particular program. You might explore what the needs are and how your group or congregation could support that ministry, perhaps with prayer or financial gift or volunteer hours.

Session goals

To help participants:

DISCOVER more about Paul and the Philippians' partnership in the gospel.

EXPLORE ways Paul encourages Christians to live their lives and depend on God.

REVIEW the entire letter to the Philippians and recall what they have learned.

Materials needed

Hymnals, if you plan to sing an Easter hymn; Bibles for everyone; art supplies.

(Note: As you lead this session, be sure to leave sufficient time for the creative activity and closing prayer.)

Witnessing in a worried world

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7.

1. There are no incorrect answers here. This is just an opportunity for participants to talk about parts of this passage that especially touch them.
2. Again there are no right or wrong answers. Participants might think of things such as: treating with respect people who serve them in stores and restaurants; taking time to be kind to someone who seems left out of a group; listening respectfully even when you disagree with someone; etc.
3. The Philippians might be worried about Paul who is in prison or Epaphroditus who has been ill or homesick. They might be concerned about their own wellbeing as a community if they are separated from Paul. If they are facing any discrimination because they are Christians, they might be concerned about that. Perhaps participants will think of other worries.
4. Participants will have their own way of summarizing Paul's main point. A summary might go something like this: Paul is encouraging the Philippians to focus on the good and virtuous things in their midst and to remember the things that they already know and have learned from Paul.
5. Some of the things Paul might expect the Philippians to remember: the encouragement to be of the "same mind"; the image of Jesus Christ as the self-emptying servant who suffered even death on the cross for the sake of love; that "lordship" is not lording it over others but serving them; to be content no matter what circumstances one is in; to depend on God's strength and providence; to remember that their real citizenship is in heaven; etc.
6. Invite participants to share from their own experiences. Remind them that there are no right or wrong answers. Perhaps they will talk about the joy and satisfaction that comes from giving out of "blossoming."
7. Paul says the Philippians supported him like no one else.
8. Once more, participants are asked to speak from their own situations, and there are not right or wrong answers. They might think of examples such as children going off to school, saying goodbye to someone they visit in the hospital or a nursing home, sending someone on a vacation or another journey or saying farewell to a friend or neighbor who is moving away. Speaking a blessing might be seen as a reminder that God is with the person being blessed.

Think on these things

You may choose to discuss these questions as they come up in the study or at this point in your time together. I

time is limited, you might select only one question or have part of the group discuss one question while the other part of the group discusses the other.

These questions invite participants to reflect on their own experience, and there are not correct or incorrect answers.

9. Participants might mention reading their Bibles or devotional literature, joining with a prayer partner or group, attending worship or Bible study, taking silent time, practicing meditation, being in nature, doing something creative, and more.
10. Some of these ideas might emerge from the conversation: giving thanks helps one notice the blessing one has; asking in a spirit of thanksgiving might make one more receptive to whatever God's "answer to prayer" is; being conscious of God's goodness and constant presence might lessen anxieties and worries.

Looking to others' interests:

Christ-shaped service

Here participants are invited to tell their own stories. Afterward they may decide together on ways to support one or more ministries that the group has lifted up.

Closing activity

Be sure to leave at least 15 or 20 minutes for this activity.

Invite members of the group to think quietly about their study of Philippians. Encourage them to recall themes and images that come to their mind. Then invite them to make a creative response to the study of Philippians. It is probably best if this activity is done in silence without members talking to one another.

As leader, you will need

to provide some art materials. If you are meeting in a limited space, the materials may be as simple as some paper and crayons and/or colored pencils. If you have more space, you might want to include colored construction paper, scissors, glue, glitter, ribbon, etc. You might also make some play dough available.

Some members might be a bit reluctant or even resistant to doing this sort of activity. Encourage them to try it and to have fun with it. Remind them that this is not a contest. They can do something as simple as drawing stick figures or just use more abstract shapes and colors to express a mood. Some participants might choose to write a poem, a song or a prayer. Help people feel free to do what is most comfortable for them.

As leader, you will need to keep track of the time and let participants know when the time is almost up. Be sure to leave enough time for everyone to say something about their creation in the closing prayer time.

Gather the group back together for the closing prayer. Invite everyone to share their creation and say something about it. Also invite them to share one thing they will take with them from this study of Philippians.

Close by singing and speaking Paul's closing benediction to each other. For this you will need to divide into two groups.





EARTH WISE

Sustainability

by Venice R. Williams

As an urban farmer, city minister and farming minister, there are words I cannot avoid. One such word is sustainability. In ecology, sustainability is the capacity to endure. It's how biological systems remain diverse and productive indefinitely. When something is sustainable, it can be maintained at a life-nurturing pace—a healthy level of existence.

Because my work involves cultivating programs, people and places, questions of sustainability often surface. Questions such as: How will all that you do continue to exist beyond you? How do we weave together the threads of our lives and communities to sustain our planet and ourselves in a manner in keeping with our Creator's intentions? How do we endure, as caretakers of God's creation, without unwinding the beautiful tapestry God created for us on Earth?

As a woman of African-Choctaw descent, my family roots can be traced back to the coast of West Africa, where my ancestors were stolen away and enslaved in the United States. My roots can also be traced back to a native nation of the Americas, the Choctaw from Alabama, who were forced into bondage on the very land they had always lived upon yet had no need to own. You could say that I represent multiple groups of people whose capacity for endurance and productivity continue to pass the test of time. Because of my ancestry, I need no reminders of how important sustainability is for God's earth and God's people.

As we weave sustainability into the tapestry of our lives and work, let us never forget how we became so unraveled in the first place. Often, it feels as though we are on a journey of restoration, unthreading that which should never have been part of the tapestry to begin with. As we sustain one thing—identified people, a certain community, a particular neighborhood, a great idea—we can strive to do no harm to all that belongs on the Earth. As we bolster and strengthen the things we care about, we can grow to understand that we do not have the right to destroy another person, to dismantle someone else's community or culture, to demolish a nearby neighborhood, to eliminate a species of plant or to desecrate a body of water.

One major challenge for sustainability in the 21st century is, once the perceived goals are attained, who and what will be left? Which people will make it through? How many languages will withstand our sustainability? How many indigenous homelands will continue to exist? How many varieties of seeds? What will the water taste like? Which medicinal herbs will live on? Will there be enough colors in the landscape? Which of the four seasons will still be recognized? Which stories will endure, and who will be telling them, hearing them or remembering them? Fifty, 75 or even 100 years from now, who will even *want* to be here on Earth? Will the Earth's tapestry survive our agendas, or will we be left with a plain piece of terra etched in good intentions, missed opportunities and greed?

What if the Earth came with a warning label: *Be careful about what you validate, what you affirm, how you preserve and where you build.* Privilege and arrogance of any kind have no place in sustaining creation. God did not instruct us to conquer the Earth or to wipe out segments of the diversity upon it. We are called to care for soil and vegetation, air and water, and creatures of all sorts. We are called to harbor each other in the most reverence of ways. Irresponsible dominion will never give glory to God.

"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Revelation 4:11).

This Earth Day (April 22) let us consider: What kinds of work and ministries should we carry out? How will all that we do continue to exist beyond us? After all, we have been entrusted by God to work to

ensure that God's reign expands, rather than declines. God created all things. We are not *building a better world*, as we too often find ourselves proclaiming. We are *nurturing God's reign*. And the Earth is within the reign of God.

According to the United Nations, by the year 2050, our global population will grow to nine billion people—all needing access to food, clean water, proper sanitation, adequate shelter, sufficient mobility, life-supporting education and holistic healthcare. I hope and pray that my great-grandchildren and their children will be among those who have such access. I know that I

must live sustainably for them, so they, too, may be born into the world God intended. I must do for them what my ancestors did for me: in spite of it all, I must produce, sustain, endure and even thrive.

So here we are. Here. Now. We gather in victory gardens and chapels, at conferences and rallies, in community parks and board rooms, on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. We are filled with Easter hope. We are eager, though sometimes anxious.

Let's act for love of the dominion of God. Let's act for our current or future great-grandchildren and their babies. Let's sustain each other. 🌿

Venice R. Williams is executive director of Alice's Garden Urban Farm and The Body and Soul Healing Arts Center, both in Milwaukee, Wis. She is also the developer of a new ELCA worshipping community called The Table, a 1st century-style church in the 21st century.



SUSTAINABILITY IDEAS FOR 2016 AND BEYOND:

Find opportunities to nourish communities and neighborhoods and be nurtured by the diverse, gifted people within them.

Re-imagine ways to live, to create and who to create with.

Tell story after story after story of possibilities pursued and imagination ignited for God's work in this world—and find ways to bring everyone along.

Consume less and preserve more.

Forage and compost.

Rest our cars and ride our bikes or walk.

Harvest rain and take shorter showers.

Turn off the lights and enjoy more candles.

Use less plastic, and no Styrofoam, some paper, more cloth, more clothespins, fewer dryers.

Reduce use of the furnace; add some extra blankets.

Add more bookshelves and fewer game systems.

Build smaller houses and larger gardens.

Diminish use of Facebook (ouch) and extend tea time at a community table.

Limit reality television and increase real living.

WALKING FOOLS

by Christa von Zychlin



"Those who trust in their own wits are fools; but those who walk in wisdom come through safely"
(Proverbs 28:26).

The elderly gentleman gave me the once over as I slipped into the hospital lobby looking for a bathroom. It was decades ago; I was a freshly minted pastor, a pioneer among the mostly male leaders of every Christian denomination. I had driven a couple of hours to visit a church member who was facing serious surgery. I always took care to wear my full clergy regalia to these hospital visits: black shirt, roman collar, tailored blazer and—just to show I was not shy about being a *woman* pastor—a poofy, feminine skirt.

To add to my strangeness, I was heavily pregnant with my first child, so I was acutely aware of my appearance. I braced myself for the kinds of questions I fielded all the time. Was I some flavor of kooky nun or member of an odd-ball cult? No time for questions now, though. I spied the women's room, did as pregnant women need to do, then flounced back out into the hospital lobby, head held high.

"Excuse me, Miss..."

I turned, just daring the old man to question me and my credentials. I distinctly remember the kind of tone of his voice.

"Your, uh, skirt is bunched up in the back, dear."

Indeed. In my pregnant-lady awkwardness, I had managed to tuck my slip and skirt into my pantyhose, and the result was not good. It took me *decades* to get over this moment without my face heating up each time I thought of it.

I'm thankful to that old man, though. First of all, I'm thankful he didn't keep quiet and allow me to traipse through the entire hospital in that condition! As time has passed, I've also wondered if he wasn't some sort of angel, on a cosmic errand to warn a young clergywoman—don't take yourself too seriously,

girl. Yes, you're a cool chick; you've got your Divinity degree, your ordination certificate and your official Letter of Call. But you're also plenty human; wonderfully fallible. At any moment, you're exactly one exposed panty away from looking like a complete fool. And maybe that's okay.

Gratuitous joke:

You: Hey, what are you doing under there?

Your unsuspecting friend: ...under where?

You: YOU SAID UNDERWEAR! (*fits of giggles*)

Consider the children

"...but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs'" (Matthew 19:14).

As a child I found church inviting, awesome and sometimes hilarious. My friend Kay and I giggled at the church soloist who sang with a high, warbling vibrato.

We snorted in our seats when the pastor mispronounced a word and firmly taught us, "Breast are the peacemakers."

We couldn't control ourselves when Grandma K accidentally farted when she stood up for Jesus.

Finally our mothers had to separate us. Which was the right thing to do. In later years I've had to shush and separate kids hundreds of times... kids laughing at the poor acolyte who can't get candles lit, kids drawing cartoons in the bulletin for each other's amusement, kids cracking up when little Sammy announces cheerfully, "I've got poopy pants, Mommy," in the middle of my sober sermon.

The Bible clearly teaches that you can never take God too seriously. At least three times we are told the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Throughout the Scriptures, we see God's power is not something to be trifled with. People are shook up when they meet the Holy One—when God thunders at them (Moses, Job), summons them for special assignments (Hagar, Jeremiah) or confirms them in their deepest desires (a baby, a healing or an exit from the tomb). In fact, an appropriate reaction to meeting God, the Bible tells us, is to fall down in fear and trembling. Therefore, I might ask myself, if I were really and completely immersed in God's presence, would the snickering of a troop of teenagers bother me so much? Would it even register?

Maybe it's a sign of spiritual maturity when we can allow children (or teens or the occasional insightful adult) to giggle a little in church. Yes, kids should sometimes be separated, occasionally even escorted out of the sanctuary in order to compose themselves. But then we need to welcome them back, even beg them to return. We need their honesty, their insights, their hilarity. And yes, that *was* a fart, and it was pretty funny. I myself hope to grow to become just like Grandma K, who laughed right along with the kids in that long-ago church pew.

Gratuitous joke:

Why do skunks love church?

They get to sit in their own pew.

THE WOMAN WHO LAUGHED

"Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me'" (Genesis 21:6).

The most famous laugh in the Old Testament is Sarah's. Her laughter is a bit salty. "Shall I know pleasure in my old age?" she asks in Genesis 18. Older couples may see it's not only a question of having a baby, it's

also the funny question of exactly how the conception is going to occur. Sarah's husband Abraham cracks up too. He laughs so hard he falls on his face. "Ahem, God, don't you remember I'm a hundred years old, and my wife is no spring chicken, either?"

Nine months later, Sarah is laughing again. Who would have guessed her old breasts would give joy, not only to her centenarian husband, but also—surprise—to a hungry newborn.

It was only after I had my own babies that I understood a related joke told by the prophet Isaiah. A circle of female seminary students with whom I recently discussed this decided Isaiah must have gotten divine inspiration from his nursing wife or sister when he speaks for God, asking, "Can a woman forget her nursing child?... Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15). The immediate insight for a woman with a superabundance of breast milk is, no. A nursing mother *can't* possibly forget her baby. After a few hours have gone by, she is so engorged as to become desperate for the child to suckle. It's a divinely ordained, symbiotic relationship. Can we smile to think God, our heavenly Creator, has such a desire for us?

Gratuitous joke:

Auntie Pearl: You'll live to be 90.

Auntie Em: I *am* 90.

Auntie Pearl: See?!

A FOOL FOR CHRIST

"If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise" (1 Corinthians 3:18b).

One of my spiritual heroes is Brother Lawrence, known for a tiny book, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Spire Books, 1981). My worn paperback edition is subtitled: "A Living Testament of Joy." Lawrence is a master of light-heartedness. After he messes up on a

project, Lawrence admonishes God, "I will never do any better if You leave me to my own devices; it's You who must prevent my falling and fix what goes wrong." When he frets no more!

One of Brother Lawrence's assignments is to go by boat to the big city to purchase communion wine at wholesale prices. This is a job he dislikes because he considers himself no good at business negotiations. Even worse, Lawrence is lame, and can only get around the boat by rolling himself over the casks! So he tells God, "Hey, it's your business I'm doing, so you'd better make sure it's done right." Brother Lawrence goes on to say the most important job in life is to love and delight ourselves in God. I laugh to picture a roly-poly monk somersaulting his way over wine barrels and learning to do so with humor, his physical clumsiness more than made up for by spiritual grace.

Brother Lawrence's attitude reminds me of the day John joined our church. John is a middle-aged adult. He has "Down syndrome," which he likes to call "Up syndrome." John is known for riding his bike to the local grocery store, standing outside the automatic doors and telling people they dropped their money. When they quickly look down to check, he happily exclaims, "April Fools!" (Never mind what month it actually is). If they take this with good humor, John rewards them with three or four more from his repertoire of jokes.

My husband and I were fairly new co-pastors in town, and the congregation was still checking us out. On New Members Sunday, after going through the normal liturgy, we asked each person to say something about themselves. John asked, "Can I tell a joke?" Well, it was a big Sunday. We had 200 people looking mighty solemn out there. "Yes, John, just one joke. But keep it clean, ok?" "Yeah, ok," John said. Then he launched into it:

"How can you tell Ronald McDonald at a nude beach?"

My heart sank. Two hundred pairs of eyes stared at us. I was envisioning a re-call of my husband and myself as the pastors of the congregation. But John was not to be deterred.

"By his sesame seed buns."

The sanctuary roared, and I'm sure at least part of the laughter was relief that the punchline wasn't anything worse!

THE LAST LAUGH

"Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy" (Psalm 126:2a).

The laugh I miss the most in the world is my sister's. She died three years ago of cancer. Not a holiday meal goes by without my missing her cries of welcome, her cackles when we looked for more cavities in the turkey to stuff, her snorting over my need to follow recipes precisely. "Add a little more wine, it will be fine," she would say, adding one splash of wine to the gravy, two splashes to refill my glass.

I hope, I trust, I'm counting on there being lots of laughter in the world to come. Meanwhile, we can practice taking life—and ourselves—a little more lightly in this one. We can learn from kids in the pew, old ladies in the Bible, joyful saints past and present and the echoes of laughter from those we've loved best. 🌸

Christa von Zychlin lives, works and laughs in Hong Kong, where she serves the ELCA as a seminary teacher and preacher with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong and the Mekong Mission Forum.

Final gratuitous joke:

Did the Sadducees believe in the resurrection of the body?

No. And that is why they were sad, you see...



Women ^{of the} **ELCA** 

Your gifts of jewelry, aprons, shawls, T-shirts, mugs and 25th anniversary Christmas ornaments support the mission of Women of the ELCA.

Visit womenoftheelca.org and click on Shop Now at the top of the page or call 800-638-3522.



Women have told their

stories of encountering Jesus, stories of how their lives have been changed, ever since Mary Magdalene and the other Mary met the resurrected Jesus at the tomb. And now, as the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation approaches, we have a new, important opportunity to tell our stories.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is championing a process to collect women's stories from around the globe, stories that tell how women have provoked change in church and society, stories that tell how women have empowered others. To assist the LWF, our organization will collect your stories throughout 2016.

All too often women's stories have been left out of recorded history. We collect these stories now to change that reality. As the National Women's History Project reminds us, "by walking history's pathways, we learn to step forward with confidence." The LWF-driven collection of stories will help future generations to do what we seek to accomplish every day—mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.

The churchwide organization will record the significant movements of the whole organization, such as banning landmines and boycotting Nestle and American Home products. We need you to contribute the local stories, stories about supporting transitional women's housing, creating after-school programs or clothing closets, making relief quilts and layette kits. You may see these as

ordinary, commonplace activities. These activities are our prayers, our worship, our acts of love that transform the world around us. These are the stories we must capture for future generations.

Stories can be presented in many different forms: written essays, videos, blogs, art, interviews, etc. Be creative! (Can you imagine a quilt telling your story? Or a photo collage?) Involve multiple generations in the process. (Have a teen interview an older woman.) Whatever form is used, please provide basic information and a way you can be contacted: name(s), dates of birth (and death), address or email.

Beyond that, address questions such as these. What are the main contributions of the individual woman (or a women's group, if that's the case) to the lives of the people in your congregation or community? Highlight one or two important moments in the woman's life. What or who contributed to the development of that woman's life of faith? What did the woman or women do to bring about reform in the congregation, the community or society?

And if there are significant contributions from your congregation's past, don't forget those.

Start your story collecting this month and continue your efforts all year long. Send your contributions to women.elca@elca.org or drop in the mail to Women of the ELCA, Attn: LWF Stories, 8765 W Higgins Road, Chicago IL 60631. 🌸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

RACE NOTES

Telling our stories

Linda Post Bushkofsky





AMEN!

Don't worry

by Catherine Malotky

"Don't worry" is easier

said than done. Paul wrote to the Philippians: "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:5b-6).

This is a lovely sentiment, but really, there are so many things to worry about. There are things close to home, including changes in health or family friction that doesn't seem to resolve. There are lists and lists of other serious things, like climate change and its dramatic consequences across the globe; civil unrest in our country and especially in other countries; the growing distance between haves and have-nots; and the scary thought that the life we've built so carefully may actually contribute to all of these things.

The truth is, sin catches up with us. Sin does not have to be a mean-spirited attack on another. It can be as subtle as our own hopes to protect our children, or a yearning for a better life for oneself. It happens in small ways, perpetrated by the best of us, sometimes even at our best moments.


Our ability to predict consequences and outcomes is imperfect. Who would have guessed that the invention of the automobile might someday be seen as a mixed blessing? Which of our best innovations will show their shadow side in the years ahead?

After waiting through the darkness of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, how can we not worry? For those of us

who earnestly desire to follow Jesus, we can become immobilized, lest we make things worse, or flip into optimism and denial rather than reality. How shall we faithfully live, much less live without worry?

Perhaps this is the wonder of Easter. Could it be that God knows and embraces our imperfections? Could it be that Jesus' life was God's risk taken to walk with us and to show us a better way? Could it be that Jesus' death spawned God's grief over our blindness and sparked God's resolve to not let our short-sightedness have the last word? Could it be that Jesus' rising was God's invitation to see ourselves as God does: imperfect, but redeemed and called to a life of both humility and courage?

"The Lord is near." Can we stop and listen? Can we open our eyes and see God at work in the world? Can we hear God calling us to balance our courage and humility for the sake of God's good intentions for all of God's creation? Can we make our requests known to God so that all might have enough to eat and live in peace and dignity, that we might move toward a culture and economy that balances the earth's capacity with our need, and that we might bring gentleness to the world around us?

Hear us, O God, even as you open our ears to hear you. In Jesus' name. Amen. 

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as director of development. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher and retreat leader.

APP SOLUTELY!

...you can get *Gather*
on your iPad, Android,
and Kindle Fire.



Download the app via iTunes,
Google Play or Amazon.

All you need to access the
articles is a print subscription.

Call 844-409-0576 or go to
www.gathermagazine.org/subscribe
to get started (\$15 for a year).
Find out more at gathermagazine.org.

DIRECTORY OF READER SERVICES

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE

Change of address, renewals, questions about your
subscription and new subscription orders must be
addressed to our subscription order center at
Cambey & West. 1 year/10 issues \$15

844-409-0576 (toll free)
or **845-267-3074**

Gather Subscription Order Center
PO Box 336
Congers, NY 10920-0336
gather@cambeywest.com

Permission to reprint articles

800-638-3522, ext. 2766 or ext. 2537
gather@elca.org

Like us on Facebook

www.facebook.com/gathermagazine

Audio CD edition, \$18

844-409-0576

Gather Editorial Office

For editorial feedback, magazine promotion questions,
article suggestions or advertising inquiries write or email:

Gather Editorial Office

Women of the ELCA

8765 W. Higgins Rd.

Chicago, IL 60631-4189

800-638-3522, ext. 2730

gather@elca.org gathermagazine.org

Stir the spirit within! Go to www.boldcafe.org.

#BXNRXWW *****AUTO**SCH 5-DIGIT 94706 FSS
#GAT 00308414 8# PG MAR 17 1286
GRADUATE SERIALS
2400 RIDGE RD
BERKELEY CA 94709-1212

01286
R321
720
484

Please direct all changes of address to Gather Subscription Order Center (see Reader Services).

No need to look anyplace else ...

The Lutheran is where you will find news and views on how life, faith, Scripture, congregational mission and more impact your life daily. Use it as a resource for education, outreach and evangelism, as well as an open discussion forum for tough issues of the day.

The Lutheran provides vital resources for healthy congregations on topics such as Lutheranism 101, stewardship, faith formation and discipleship, as well as a massive library of more than 9,000 archived stories and study guides to 400 major articles.

Print and digital subscriptions are available. For more information about plans, call 800-328-4648 or visit www.thelutheran.org.

Sign up for our free weekly email newsletter at www.thelutheran.org.

Need church bulletin information?

www.thelutheran.org/template/page.cfm?id=46

The Lutheran



Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America
God's work. Our hands.